

Talking with Children about the New Flu

As news and talk about the novel H1N1 (swine flu) continues, it's likely that children will hear something about it on TV or at school. Here are some tips to help calm the fears children may have — and help them stay healthy.

Flu Worries & Mental Health

Children are happiest when they can stick with their routines. It makes them feel comfortable and safe. So keeping your child inside and not letting them play with friends for fear of flu may be stressful for them. Keep informed and teach your children the common things they can do, so you can keep life as normal as possible and help your child feel safe.

What to Say

- 1. Find out what they know.** Ask your child to tell you what he or she already knows. Having your child tell you what she or he has heard, instead of you telling them about it, lets you know what misconceptions or misunderstandings you may need to address.
- 2. Explain the facts.** Your child may have lots of questions about H1N1 (swine flu). Clearing up confusion and providing the facts may make him or her less worried.
 - Tailor information to your child's age, using words you know he or she will understand.
 - You may want to explain that H1N1 (swine flu) is a sickness that pigs can get, and that these germs changed over time to become a sickness that people can get and pass to each other. Explain that this is now an illness you can get from people, not pigs.
 - Be sure to explain that doctors and government are working to protect everyone, and will be ready to treat children and families with the flu if they get sick.
- 3. Talk about healthy habits.** Take this opportunity to remind your child about good health habits, as they will not only help protect a child during the regular flu season or a severe pandemic, but will also keep him or her healthier in general.
 - Teach your child to wash hands often and well. Wash hands with soap and water for as long as it takes to sing the ABC song.
 - Explain that hands pick up invisible little germs that can make people sick. The germs can get inside when you touch your eyes, nose or mouth. Washing with soap and

water gets rid of the germs before they can make you sick. If you can't use soap and water, it's OK to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Because hand sanitizers contain alcohol, make sure you keep them out of reach when you're not using them.

- Teach your children to cover their coughs and sneezes with tissues or the crook of their arm. Explain that germs are caught in the tissue and can't get out where they can make other people sick. Make sure they know to throw away the tissue in the trash and then wash their hands. Remind them that if they don't have a tissue, it's OK to sneeze or cough into their elbow so their hands don't get dirty and the germs don't spread into the air.
- Teach your children to be careful not to get too close to others if he or she feels sick, or if the other person feels sick.
- Teach your children the habits that will help keep them healthy, like eating nutritious foods, being physically active and getting enough rest.

Containing the Flu

It's important that you help your child understand the directions being given by the schools, health officials and government to help keep illness from spreading. Understanding that everyone — including children — can do their part to help keep flu and other illnesses from spreading lets them know that they are important members of the family, the school and the community.

If your child is not feeling well and seems to have flu symptoms, call your health care provider. Follow your health care providers advice, including when to stay home from school.

Make a Plan

This is a good time to plan ahead in case you or your child has to stay home for a week or two. Think about what your family will need and make a plan for your family so that you are prepared. Stock up on food, water and medications you would need. Also have games, activities, books and ways to stay in touch with friends (like phone or e-mail) ready for your children to make the time spent at home less stressful.

Providing art, play and other activities can help your child express how they feel, help you communicate with them, and keep them entertained.

Stay Informed

- Check www.healthvermont.gov, www.cdc.gov or www.pandemicflu.gov often for updates, information, planning guides and resources. Or dial 2-1-1 for answers to your questions or help finding Vermont services you need.
- Listen to radio and TV, and read news stories about the new flu and follow the directions of your school, your health care provider, and the Vermont Department of Health.

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